

## Part 121-1: WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

### 1-1 Where Are We?

This plan is about how we use land – a matter to which Rhode Island, as the geographically smallest state, needs to be keenly attuned. Even as you read this, Rhode Island's future landscape is being shaped. Hundreds of land use decisions are made every day.

Consider these examples:

- A couple with a growing family places a down payment on a new and bigger house in a suburban town.
- A global corporation selects a Rhode Island downtown office suite to house its North American sales support operation.
- A chef newly arrived from New York opens a restaurant in an abandoned urban storefront that formerly housed a bakery.
- A farm family reluctantly concludes that it no longer can continue its farm operation, and accepts a purchase offer from a real estate developer.
- An elderly widow looking to downsize moves to an assisted-living community.

All these decisions affect land use by impacting the demand side of the market. This market will deliver different configurations of land uses designed to meet the demand. This may prompt construction in greenfields (previously undeveloped areas), demolition of older buildings to provide “pad-ready” sites for commercial or industrial development, or renovation and reconfiguration of what already exists for residential or other purposes.

The market is also affected by planning, regulatory and public investment actions that provide the legal framework and enable the various ways we employ land:

- To generate taxes, the zoning board of a rural community votes to re-zone forestland adjoining a highway exit for commercial use.
- The City Council of a major city endorses a sweeping redevelopment plan for the city's waterfront.
- A state development agency provides a grant for a town to extend water lines to a new industrial park on the edge of town.
- The planning board of a suburban community adopts a comprehensive plan amendment encouraging multi-family housing within certain commercial districts.

These decisions also respond to demand – actual, perceived or anticipated, in such diverse fields as housing, transportation, economic development and environmental protection. They will produce results in the near term, of course, but also will affect generations to come.

Land use, basically, is about how we arrange our communities to meet our needs. Land use policies will dictate much about how we and our children will live. It is

incumbent upon us to be very deliberate in deciding how best to use our land, a limited and precious resource in Rhode Island.

### *Land Use Trends 1970-1995*

Rhode Island's landscape has been continuously shaped and reshaped by land use decisions since its settlement as a colony. Successive waves of change, demographic and economic, have left their marks on our state's land, creating the tapestry of built and natural environments we enjoy today. Blends of glacial landforms, rock outcroppings, wetlands and coastal features for generations have constrained builders but inspired creative designs. The result is a large measure of what makes Rhode Island's built environment so distinctive: the compactness and intimacy of its traditional settlements. The fact that city, town, village, and farm and forest patterns remain identifiable as distinct elements of Rhode Island's landscape makes it endearing as a whole. The R.I. Economic Policy Council has called this a state full of "authentic places." Locales feel "real" and welcoming, and places have kept their unique identity when so much of the nation has succumbed to increasing uniformity and "sameness."

Perhaps because we have so little of it, land use in Rhode Island has historically been more efficient and prudent than many other parts of the country. A striking characteristic of Rhode Island's overall land use pattern is that it retains a strong distinction between historic urban centers and more rural surrounding areas. Despite a decline in manufacturing, disinvestment in urban areas, and the suburban growth characterizing the last 50 years, settlement around the waterfront and the traditional manufacturing centers remains the dominant feature of the state's landscape.

Rhode Island's population and housing densities – 1,003 persons and 420 housing units, respectively, per square mile – are among the highest in the country, yet our state also ranks very highly among all states in percentage of land that is forested, at nearly 60 percent. ((29:vii)) The explanation for this apparent inconsistency is that most of the population resides in the center of the state in a highly populated, relatively narrow, urban/suburban corridor flanking the shores of Narragansett Bay and filling the valleys of the Blackstone and Pawtuxet Rivers. This corridor, about 20 miles wide and 40 miles long, contains over 75 percent of the population and nearly all of the public infrastructure, major transportation routes, and institutional and cultural centers. Beyond this dense core, on both sides, patterns of development have been retained at decidedly lower intensities.

But looking ahead, will this traditional land use pattern continue? Much of the heavily developed core of the state described above was in place prior to the 1970s. Recent decades have brought some dramatic changes in how we use land compared to prior practices. Consider some of the findings from the Statewide Planning Program's most recent statistical profile of statewide land use, *Land Use Trends 1970-1995*:

- *Rhode Island developed its land at a rate much higher than historic trends.* The portion of Rhode Island's land area in developed uses increased in this 25-year period from approximately 143,000 to 205,200 acres – by more than 62,000 acres, or by 43 percent. While precise data on the state's earliest development are lacking, the recent rate of land conversion appears extraordinary: it took 334 years to develop the first 20 percent of the state's

land, and then *within a mere 25 years*, we added nearly half again as much land – another 9 percent of the state -- in developed use.

- *Development increased nearly nine times faster than the population grew.* While developed land increased by 43 percent, state population increased by only five percent in this 25-year period. Developed land increased from roughly 6,000 square feet per Rhode Islander in 1960 to over 8,000 square feet in 1995.
- *Land in residential use increased 55 percent, as the state added four units of housing for every one new addition to the population<sup>1</sup>.* Despite a modest population growth of 10.4 percent, Rhode Island experienced a dramatic 40 percent increase in the number of households<sup>2</sup>. Households have become smaller than ever before, the 2000 Census recording an average of 2.47 persons per household. Households becoming more numerous increased the demand for residential land. This demand was also largely for single-family houses on larger house lots, meaning more land consumed per new house.
- *Population continued to migrate toward the rural parts of the state.* Migration from the state's older central cities that first began in the 1940s continued, with population shifts fueling the suburbanization of formerly rural areas. As city residents dispersed to suburbs and new residents moved into the state, the patterns of housing changed. Historically, housing had been densest in the communities of Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket. Proportionally fewer multifamily housing units were constructed in the suburbs, and the relatively inexpensive price of land enabled single-family homes to be constructed on larger lots than in the central cities. Population movement toward the more rural areas became a dominant land use characteristic in the latter half of the 20th century.
- *Employment centers expanded away from central cities.* Growth in employment was greatest in the state's suburban communities, which gained 56,000 jobs while the state's cities lost 10,000 jobs during the same period.
- *Commercial land use virtually doubled.* During the 1970s and 1980s the amount of land used for commercial purposes increased dramatically, from 7,000 acres to 13,200 acres. This growth occurred particularly in the inner and outer ring suburbs, although the older central cities experienced it as well. As population spread into less developed parts of the state, critical densities were reached that provided opportunities for businesses to serve this population and to draw upon them as a labor force. Unlike residential property, commercial land use was concentrated along the most heavily traveled roadways, resulting in a pattern of strip development most readily identified as "sprawl."

---

<sup>1</sup> During the 1970 to 2000 period.

<sup>2</sup> Percentage change reflects period from 1970 to 2000.

- *Industrial land use increased dramatically and moved farther into the suburbs as well.* Industrial land use increased by approximately 72 percent, from 5,300 acres to 8,600 acres – in spite of fewer people working in manufacturing, the state's traditional industrial base. Industry tended to relocate from riverfront sites in the old manufacturing centers to the surrounding countryside. The very nature of what is “industrial” changed with technology and shifting economic forces.
- *The amount of land dedicated to transportation increased.* Construction of the three Interstate highways I-95, I-195, and I-295 was completed by 1975. However, much of the increase in road mileage was attributable to newly opened residential neighborhood streets. The out-migration from the cities, largely enabled by the automobile, resulted in significant growth in many individual communities. Roads that were originally designed for light amounts of local traffic soon exceeded their capacity. Commercial enterprises followed the populations moving to suburban and rural communities. Roads became commercial strips for retail businesses. Successful suburban businesses became new trip-generators, adding to the pressure for new and/or improved roads. Large commercial and industrial enterprises sought easy access to highways, especially Interstates, increasing pressure for upgraded state roads or new Interstate access ramps.

#### *Land Use Trends Since 1995*

The trends described above, are drawn from state land use inventories taken between 1970 and 1995. While this data is ten years old, other data sources such as building permits and recent aerial photography confirm that Rhode Island's use of land in the past decade continues to follow land use patterns described by planners as sprawl. On average, about 30 % of the land identified as undeveloped in 1995 has been built upon over the last ten years. In some of the State's more rapidly developing communities this recent building activity has consumed as much as 75% of the developable land that was identified as vacant in 1995.

On a more optimistic note, this same analysis identified some positive trends. Development of vacant land in the State's urban and urban fringe communities appears to be reversing decades of disinvestment. West Warwick has developed 70% of its vacant land during the last ten years and other urban communities appear to be following a similar trend (Warwick 65%, Providence 60%, Bristol 60%, for a complete listing see Appendix D). Moreover, investment in rehabilitation and reuse projects that optimize the potential of developed land and its supporting infrastructure appears to have taken hold over the past ten years. Residential building permits in the City of Providence alone between 2002 and 2005 exceeded 3,000 units and 2,700 of those were for multi-unit developments, many in previously commercial and industrial properties. Based upon tracking of recent major capital investments by the Economic Development Corporation, we have every reason to believe that these trends are continuing.

These most recent trends appear to indicate that the era of disinvestment in Rhode Island, and particularly its urban areas, has ended. Decades of Rhode Island's pioneering historic preservation efforts are coming to fruition in traditional centers and neighborhoods throughout the state. Rhode Island's aggressive historic tax credit

program has been behind much of the investment in historic commercial and industrial buildings such as the development of residential lofts in Downcity Providence and conversions such as Rising Sun in Olneyville. Other major public investments, such as relocation of rail lines in Providence, have given rise to projects such as the successful Capital Center which continues to draw new development opportunities.

While the last decade has witnessed a resurgence in development throughout the state it has also been accompanied by major investments in land conservation. Between 1992 and 2003, four major state open space bonds and numerous local bonds provided over \$73 million in land and new facilities for Rhode Island's open space system. Nearly 7,000 acres have been added to the state system, 1,857 of threatened farmland preserved, and 3,115 acres of local open space has been protected.

### **1-3 Where Are We Going?**

The trends described above earlier, although tempered by some more recent activity in our urban centers, confirm that Rhode Island's use of land in recent decades has set a new trajectory that cannot be sustained – one that is more characterized by the diffuse, low density land use pattern described by planners as *sprawl*. This relatively contemporary development pattern, while not unique to Rhode Island, appears to be continuing in spite of major changes to the State's planning enabling legislation that calls for detailed local comprehensive plans and land management regulations that implement those plans. The product of those plans is a state characterized by future of predominantly low density, scattered site development (see Figure 121-04(5)).

Why do Rhode Island's public planning efforts seem to be missing their often-stated goal of concentrating development and controlling sprawl? In spite of an extensive state-municipal comprehensive planning system and centralized state environmental permitting, much of Rhode Island's development over the past 30 years has not followed the official state planning visions as set forth in the previous State land use plans.

The first Rhode Island State Land Use Plan, in 1975, met the challenge of land management in the smallest state with very good inventory and analysis and an excellent, far-sighted plan designed to accommodate population growth and economic development through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The plan's basic assumptions were that half of the state would remain as open space and development will be allowed to take place on the remaining land which was not developed in 1960. This newly urbanized land would be built on at an intensity of about two-thirds of the 1960 intensity (ratio of population to developed area). (The two thirds figure is an arbitrarily chosen factor which reflects the fact that new development had been occurring at a much lower intensity than existed in 1960.) The vision was far-sighted and bold as it proposed new planned communities, however, the implementation was idealistic and threatening as it promoted major property tax reform and state management of zoning.

The 1989 Land Use Plan re-created the 1975 plan map and the same vision of concentrated development around existing centers. This plan, however, proposed that implementation be accomplished through, first, community comprehensive plans to be approved by state agencies and, second, by the municipal use of a wide range of newly enabled zoning mechanisms.

The development of the past 30 years has not followed either the 1975 or the 1989 plan, both of which promoted considerable density mixtures in new development and building near public infrastructure. Research for this Land Use 2025 plan indicates that low rise and scattered development has squandered much of the areas best suited for high density with low intensity uses and whole districts of buildings which are disconnected both in terms of design and land uses. While not ignoring the significant planning foundation that these plans established they failed to adequately deal with the fiscal aspects of land use, notably, property rights and taxation as well as the potential development impacts of state investments.

*The essential land use question for Rhode Island has become whether to stay on the current course, one that embraces practices that consume land at unparalleled rates, or to return to a more efficient mode of land use inspired by traditional models of development that have served it so well for over 300 years.*

#### *Current Trend Scenario Map and Analysis*

To illustrate the choice this question presents, and to gain a better appreciation for where recent land use trends are taking us, Statewide Planning prepared a geographic analysis of what Rhode Island's overall land use pattern could look like in 2025 based upon the Program's projections of population, household, and employment growth through 2025, *and a continuation of the development patterns of recent decades.* This so-called "Current Trend Scenario" was one of four alternative land use futures developed by the Program in the course of preparing this Plan and described in detail in Part Four.

The Current Trend Scenario assumes the continuation of current land use practices and management strategies, along with existing facilities. It assumes that current state laws and local ordinances would continue to regulate land use, and it assumes continued strong market demand for land and housing in Rhode Island.

*Most significantly, the Current Trend Scenario assumes that future residential development will follow the density breakdowns specified in the current Future Land Use Maps of the state's 39 municipalities.* These maps, a required component of municipal comprehensive plans adopted by all cities and towns, are, under state law, the basis for local zoning. In short, it is a picture of what 20 more years of "building to current plans" could hold in store for the state's landscape.

Figure 121-01(1) shows the current development status of Rhode Island based upon the latest available (1995) statewide land use survey data. Developed land – constituting 29 percent of the state's area – is shown in gray.

Figure 121-01(2) illustrates the state's likely land use pattern in 2025 under the Trend Scenario. Areas that are presently developed are assumed to continue in developed use through 2025. These appear in gray on the map, as they do in Figure 121-01(1). Additional areas likely to be developed to accommodate the state's projected growth needs through 2025 are shown in red on the map. Comprising over 108,000 acres, they represent another 16 percent of the state's total area.

Continuing on the current trend, by 2025, 45 percent of Rhode Island would be developed. While 55 percent of the state would still be undeveloped (when non-buildable water and wetland areas are deducted), only 26 percent of the state's area would be remain available for future needs beyond 2025.

*While the analysis considered only needs through 2025, extrapolating the Current Trend Scenario beyond 2025 leaves open the possibility that the state could exhaust its entire developable land base by 2050-2060.*

#### *How the Trend Accommodates Future Needs*

The Current Trend Scenario would be characterized by relatively low densities, expanding local road networks and unfocused public investments. Nearly 70 percent of new residential development would occur at densities requiring one acre or more of land per housing unit – much lower than the densities currently found in the state's older suburbs and core cities. Overall, densities would be significantly lower than current statewide averages. Development would be unfocused, occurring randomly throughout communities and around the state. Cities could continue to lose economic vitality and perhaps population, as new employment options and housing continued to migrate to formerly rural locales.

Geographically, the Current Trend Scenario would produce a highly diffuse or sprawling urbanized region having a relatively small residual of unfragmented open areas. Important resources including farmland, critical natural areas, existing protected lands, and large forest tracts would be highly susceptible to development impacts, given the wide dispersion of future development activities. The proliferation of developed uses across watersheds would constitute increased risk for contamination of wetlands and water bodies, including potable supply sources.

**Figure 121-01(1)**



**Figure 121-01(2)**

Low densities and scattering of development would make public provision and management of supporting infrastructure and services more expensive, perhaps bordering on the prohibitive in many areas. The emphasis on low-density residential development would limit housing choice and make development of affordable units in adequate numbers problematic. Separation of uses and low densities would also make public transit prohibitive and enforce the high reliance on automobiles for transportation needs. Absent expansion of highway capacities, high levels of congestion could result from increased traffic. All of these outcomes constitute policy conflicts with the objectives of this Plan and with goals and policies of other elements of the State Guide Plan.

The Current Trend Scenario must be seen as a potential threat for Rhode Island's future. It represents a likely outcome of continuing on the path we currently are following, the product of 20 more years of building to current plans and ordinances. On the other hand, *it is not destiny*. The dramatic impacts it portends do not have to be realized. There is an opportunity to change direction.

The Current Trend Scenario should remind us that Rhode Island has been following its current development path *only* for the last 30-40 years. The *current* trend is a decided departure from the *long-term* trend. The traditional development pattern that Rhode Island followed for over three centuries is one of a more compact pattern of cities and town and village centers, surrounded by open countryside.

The power, and the responsibility, to shape our state's future landscape – the places where our children and grandchildren will live – lie with us.